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Abstract

It was only during the last years of Jean Rhys' life that she became recognized as a West Indian writer. Kenneth Ramchand was one of the first West Indian critics to identify her fiction, along with that of Geoffrey Drayton and Phyllis Shand Allfrey, as belonging to the work of the white West Indian minority. In 1978, the year before Rhys' death, Louis James published a critical study of all her fiction in which he asserted:

Reflections of Obeah in Jean Rhys' Fiction

It was only during the last years of Jean Rhys' life that she became recognized as a West Indian writer. Kenneth Ramchand was one of the first West Indian critics to identify her fiction, along with that of Geoffrey Drayton and Phyllis Shand Allfrey, as belonging to the work of the white West Indian minority. In 1978, the year before Rhys' death, Louis James published a critical study of all her fiction in which he asserted:

Even in her books written wholly about Europe, the sensibility is not wholly European. Her sensitivity to heat and to cold, to bright colour or the absence of colour, her sense of another life behind the mask of society conventions, were formed in the Antilles.¹

And Thomas F. Staley expressed a similar judgment a year later:

Leaving aside the problematic relationship between life and art, it became clear to me from the first reading of her work that her background and culture not only set Rhys apart from her contemporary novelists, but also shaped a widely different sensibility and radical consciousness.²

True, Ford Madox Ford had sensed some special connection between Jean Rhys' birthplace and the subject matter of her first collected short stories when he stated in his long, diffuse Preface to *The Left Bank* (1927):

And coming from the Antilles, with a ... terrific ... passion for stating the case of the underdog, she has let her pen loose on the Left Banks of the Old World....³

But Ford failed to take his observation beyond the simple suggestion that there was some connection between 'coming from the Antilles' and 'stating the case of the underdog'.

One other commentator, Alec Waugh, noted (in 1949) that 'Dominica has coloured her temperament and outlook. It was a clue to her, just as she was a clue to it'.⁴ However, neither Ford nor Waugh explored the

literary effects of Jean Rhys' West Indian-ness, and now some attempt should be made to go beyond the identification of Rhys as a West Indian writer to an effort at understanding *how* Rhys' fiction reflects the special qualities of her cultural background. The purpose of this essay is to demonstrate how a specific cultural aspect of Rhys' Dominican childhood affected her imagination and her literature. The specific cultural feature to which I refer is the Dominican practice of Obeah.

The version of Obeah practiced on Rhys' home island of Dominica has been described by Rhys herself as a milder version of Voodoo such as is practiced on Haiti, like Dominica a formerly French island where a French patois is spoken. In Rhys' unfinished autobiography, *Smile Please*, she says about Obeah, '...even in my time nobody was supposed to take it very seriously' but she confirms the existence of Obeah with an example of a practitioner in her own family household: 'I was told about her [Ann Tewitt, the obeah woman] in a respectful, almost awed tone.'⁵ In fact, Obeah was taken seriously on Dominica at the turn of the century and it was taken seriously by the child Gwen Williams (Jean Rhys). Obeah was a pervasive feature of Dominican life during Rhys' childhood and adolescence; her immediate household included a respected practitioner of Obi ritual; and, there were other additional vestiges of Obi observance closely surrounding her — all of which influenced her thinking during her formative years.

I cannot claim to be the first Rhys critic to point to the importance of Obeah in her writing. In his critical study on Jean Rhys, Louis James states that 'her imaginative awareness of *obeah* was to enable her to create the most hallucinatory scenes of *Wide Sargasso Sea*'. James in turn cites Thomas Atwood's *The History of the Island of Dominica* to indicate how deeply the Dominicans were committed to what Atwood called 'witchcraft and idolatry' at the time of Atwood's visit in the late seventeen hundreds. Thus, witchcraft and Obeah were documented on Dominica at least a hundred years before Rhys' birth, and they undoubtedly extend back to the arrival of African slaves in Dominica which Dominican historian Lennox Honychurch dates to the mid-eighteenth century. It is Rhys' awareness of and imaginative participation in this heritage of what Atwood calls 'witchcraft' that I shall detail today.

Before doing so, however, I wish to make one last obeisance to a critic and writer of West Indian literature who perhaps best understands Rhys' imaginative participation in Dominican Obeah. Wilson Harris' sensitivity to Rhys' art is demonstrated in his *Kunapipi* article on Rhys, 'Carnival of Psyche'. Harris points out Rhys' dual ancestry (Welsh and Creole), and identifies her imaginative insights as both 'white' and

'black', a combination Harris exemplifies by Christianity and Obeah. Harris states that 'Obeah is a pejorative term' and continues to say that 'it reflects significantly a state of mind or embarrassment in both black and white West Indians, a conviction of necessary magic, necessary hell-fire or purgatory through which to re-enter 'lost' origins, 'lost' heavens, 'lost' divinity'.⁶

Harris' statement that 'Obeah is a pejorative term' is problematic because he does not clarify for whom he believes it exists in a pejorative sense: himself, Londoners, expatriate British in the West Indies, North Americans, West Indians. All such possible candidates aside, Jean Rhys did not consider Obeah as a pejorative term or even as a word conveying a negative value. In fact, she so internalized the cultural values of Dominican Obeah that she eventually came to view herself as the white witch, the West Indian Obeah woman among the alien inhabitants of England.

The initial literary manifestation of Rhys' psychic involvement with the phenomenon of witchcraft appears in her first published material, the collected short stories of *The Left Bank*. Rhys had been away from Dominica for twenty years when the stories were written. However, despite two decades of absence from the West Indies, the memory of Rhys' Dominican homeland remained strong, working its way in various manners into the collection. *The Left Bank* admirably exemplifies what Harris calls the combination of black and white tones, containing as it does pieces such as 'Trio', 'Mixing Cocktails', and 'Again the Antilles' which are distinct West Indian counterparts to the Montparnassian pieces. The Montparnassian pieces themselves contain frequent repudiations of Anglo-Saxon behaviour and attitudes while there are also some strange extrusions of heterodox material which do not seem to fit into the mainly anecdotal matter set in a European context. For example, heterodoxy is illustrated in the piece entitled 'In the Rue de L'arrivée' wherein Dorothy Dufreyne, pointedly cited as an Anglo-Saxon lady, dreams of dying and being conducted willingly to hell. Her concern, expressed in the final line of the story, is that hell might turn out to be heaven. This unusual point-of-view for an Anglo-Saxon lady bears out Harris' observation that Obeah 'reflects ... a state of mind ... in both black and white West Indians ... [of] a conviction of ... necessary hell-fire or purgatory through which to re-enter 'lost' origins'. That the actuality of Obeah had not faded from Rhys' consciousness even after twenty years away from Dominica is demonstrated in 'Mixing Cocktails', where she evokes a figure who turns up again and again in her writing, that of 'our cook, the old Obeah woman', here named 'Ann Twist'.

In 'Mixing Cocktails' the Rhysian character receives her first lessons from the Obeah woman. She 'mustn't look too much at de moon'. The narrative voice explains, 'If you fall asleep in the moonlight you are bewitched.' The little Creole girl who is prone to falling asleep in the verandah hammock is thus warned against the danger of moon madness. As a child, then, the Rhysian heroine connects Obeah, witchery, and madness — a congeries that peaks in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. 'Ann Twist's' white counterpart emerges in the last piece of the collection, the lengthy approximation of Rhys' flight through continental Europe. In 'Vienne' the heroine Francine and her husband escape arrest in Vienna by fleeing to Budapest and from Budapest to Prague.

It was an odd place, that hotel, full of stone passages and things. I lay vaguely wondering why Prague reminded me of witches.... I read a book when I was a kid — *The Witch of Prague*. No. It reminded me of witches anyhow. Something dark, secret and grim.⁷

The story 'Vienne' and the collection *The Left Bank* end in Prague, leaving Francine to adopt the style of the city that reminds her of witches: 'I noticed at lunch that the grand chic at Prague seemed to be to wear dead black. I groped in the trunk for something similar, powdered carefully, rouged my mouth, painted a beauty spot under my left eye.' Making up her face as if for carnival, Francine assumes the dark dress of the city of witches. At this point in Rhys' fiction, the black and white tones are still separate: Ann Twist, the black Obeah woman, and Francine, the white witch of Prague.

The Obeah woman Ann Twist becomes Anne Chewett in Rhys' self-declared favourite novel, *Voyage in the Dark*. The eighteen-year-old heroine sinks into reverie tinged with delirium shortly before the abortion with which the novel concludes. The heroine, Anne Morgan,⁸ recalls the extraordinary mountainscape of her home island, conjuring up its image by mentally listing the mountains' patois names. Morne Diablotin, by free association, releases the memory of Anne Chewett who 'used to say it's haunted and obeah'. Anne Chewett's authority for identifying a spot consecrated to Obi is attested by the fact that she has been jailed for practicing Obeah. These repeated literary references to the Williams family's resident Obeah woman may seem to indicate little more than the indelibility with which Ann Tewitt's presence was etched on Jean Rhys' childhood. However, *Voyage in the Dark* includes that important new piece of information which helps provide insight into Rhys' evaluation of the Obeah woman's social position: Anne Chewett has spent time in jail for practicing Obeah. This information reflects Wilson Harris' obser-

vation that Obeah carries a pejorative value, and, more central to Rhys' canon, it reflects the demonstrated social fact that women who practice either African or European witchcraft are routinely punished by the dominant society to which they belong as non-typical members.

The almost casually offered information that Anne Chewett had been incarcerated for Obeah practice takes on a new dimension in the uncollected short story 'I Spy A Stranger'. Here there is no reference to the West Indies or to Obeah practice. But there is a reappearance of the Witch of Prague motif. Such a reappearance is not entirely surprising, even though 'I Spy A Stranger' was published in 1966, thirty-nine years after 'Vienne'. As the Obeah woman motif is inapplicable to a thoroughly English protagonist in a totally British setting, it is simply replaced by the more appropriate allusion to a European conjure woman: the Witch of Prague.

Jean Rhys told Marcelle Bernstein in a 1969 *Observer* interview that the villagers of Cheritan Fitzpaine had accused her of being a witch after she had settled there. One of her neighbours 'told the whole village I practiced black magic'.⁹ This sort of hostility, which Rhys encountered in England even after decades of British residency, informs 'I Spy A Stranger'. The 'I' of the title is the collective village mentality and the 'Stranger' is Laura, the middle-aged heroine who visits a female cousin in England during the second world war. Mutual antagonism is displayed in 'I Spy A Stranger' and it is the 'stranger' who is eventually punished. Laura's punishment is similar to that of Anne Chewett, the West Indian woman jailed for practicing Obeah. After an unsuccessful attempt to bring civil charges against Laura for violating blackout regulations, the villagers, headed by Ricky, adopt the time-honoured mode of removing an objectionable woman from society: incarceration for madness. The sanatorium to which Laura is shanghaied equates the attic to which Antoinette Rochester is incarcerated as a madwoman in *Wide Sargasso Sea*: 'There was a photograph on the cover of a prospectus showing a large, ugly house with small windows, those on the two top floors barred. The grounds were as forbidding as the house and surrounded by a high wall.'¹⁰ Laura, early in her visit dubbed as the Witch of Prague, is jailed as a madwoman because the disposal of witches by burning lacks social approval in World War II England. It is reserved for Antoinette, the white witch of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, to suffer both incarceration, the established punishment for Obeah practice, and burning, the traditional punishment for witchcraft.

What Wilson Harris calls Rhys' 'mythic' treatment of West Indian Obeah enabled Rhys to transcend the social barriers imposed by her skin

colour. Anna Morgan exclaims: 'I wanted to be black, I always wanted to be black,' and Jean Rhys attests in her autobiography that she prayed ardently as a child to be black. The frustration of belonging to a minority race is illustrated in Anna Morgan's description of her social relationship with her childhood companion Francine:

The thing about Francine was that when I was with her I was happy. She was small and plump and blacker than most of the people out there, and she had a pretty face.... But I knew that of course she disliked me ... because I was white; and that I would never be able to explain to her that I hated being white.¹¹

What racial barriers prevented Rhys from achieving in actual life, literature enabled her to accomplish through art: an erasure of racial barriers with a resultant free flow between black and white identities. The first indication of this free flow is Rhys' naming of her white witch of Prague (in 'Vienne') after her black childhood friend Francine.

In her autobiography, Rhys verifies Francine's real life role described in *Voyage in the Dark*.

I made great friends with a negro girl called Francine.... Francine's stories were ... full of jokes and laughter, descriptions of beautiful dresses and good things to eat. But the start was always a ceremony. Francine would say, 'Tim-tim.' I had to answer 'Bois sèche,' then she'd say, 'Tablier Madame est derriere dos'.... She always insisted on this ceremony before starting a story and it wasn't until much later, when I was reading a book about obeah, that I discovered that 'Bois sèche' is one of the gods. I grew very fond of Francine and admired her; when she disappeared without a word to me I was hurt. People did disappear, they went to one of the other islands, but not without saying goodbye.¹²

Rhys' young friend was in her own way a minor practitioner of Obeah, invoking one of the ceremonial forms and one of the ceremonial figures. She required young Gwen Williams' participation in a fragment of Obeah ritual, and she helped establish the general atmosphere over which Ann Tewitt presided with greater authority. Francine was Gwen Williams' own age and it was easier for the young girl to identify herself with her companion than with the older woman. The extent to which the young white Creole did identify with the young black Creole is displayed in *Wide Sargasso Sea* when the players of the Dominican drama are transformed into the characters of the novel: Antoinette Cosway and Tia, Antoinette's childhood friend.

Tia and Antoinette share many childhood hours, swimming together, cooking and eating treats, sleeping together. And Tia deserts Antoinette. When Antoinette runs to Tia for solace during the firing of Coulibri, Tia

betrays Antoinette by throwing a rock at her. 'As I ran, I thought, I will live with Tia and I will be like her.... When I was close I saw the jagged stone in her hand but I did not see her throw it. I did not feel it either, only something wet, running down my face.' Antoinette's affection for Tia blocks out the treasonous rock. Tia's ambivalence, engendered by racial politics, expresses itself after she throws the stone that wounds Antoinette. 'I looked at her and I saw her face crumple up as she began to cry. We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking-glass.'¹⁵ Tia disappears from Antoinette's life in the novel but readers of the novel know that in its final scene Antoinette returns to an apparition of Tia as she flings herself from the parapet of Thornfield Hall. Never forgotten, Tia, like Francine, remains a lifelong influence. And when she disappears from the novel she is replaced by Christophine as the child Antoinette matures into adulthood and needs an adult companion.

While Tia only recites isolated incantations to an Obeah god, Christophine delves more deeply into Obeah practice, consummating as it were, the initiation over which Tia officiated. Christophine is the Obeah woman from Martinique of whom the local folk are afraid. She inspires the same respect and fear that Ann Tewitt inspired in Gwen Williams' childhood home. Of Christophine, young Antoinette recounts:

The girls from the bayside who sometimes helped with the washing and cleaning were terrified of her. That, I soon discovered, was why they came at all — for she never paid them. Yet they brought presents of fruit and vegetables and after dark I often heard low voices from the kitchen. (p.21)

The fealty to an Obeah woman implied in this quotation; the presents brought in possible payment for services rendered 'after dark' are most subtly suggested. A more graphic imaginative construction of Christophine's association with Obeah is created by the child Antoinette who superimposes the paraphernalia of Obeah over the austerity of Christophine's bedroom at Coulibri:

I knew her room so well — the pictures of the Holy Family and the prayer for a happy death. She had a bright, patchwork counterpane, a broken-down press for her clothes, and my mother had given her an old rockingchair.

Yet one day when I was waiting there I was suddenly very much afraid. The door was open to the sunlight, someone was whistling near the stables, but I was afraid. I was certain that hidden in the room ... there was a dead man's dried hand, white chicken feathers, a cock with its throat cut, dying slowly, slowly.... No one had spoken to me about obeah — but I knew what I would find if I dared to look. (pp.31-2)

The question of whether or not Christophine actually practices witchcraft is resolved later in the novel when she is importuned by Antoinette to prepare a love potion. She complies, all the while warning Antoinette that her magic does not work well for békés.

That Christophine is the literary descendant of Ann Twist, 'our cook, the old Obeah woman' of 'Mixing Cocktails' is illustrated by a story Antoinette tells her new husband Rochester. Awakening during the night and finding herself watched by two rats, the child Antoinette ran onto the verandah to sleep in a hammock.

There was a full moon that night — and I watched it for a long time. There were no clouds chasing it, so it seemed to be standing still and it shone on me. Next morning Christophine was angry. She said it was very bad to sleep in the moonlight when the moon was full. (p.83)

Linked with Obeah and witchcraft, with earlier Obeah women in the Rhys canon, Christophine is threatened with jail when she suggests to Rochester that he return to Antoinette a portion of her dowry. Rochester sends Christophine away and she disappears as Tia disappeared before her.

Christophine's replacement by Antoinette is infinitely more subtle than the earlier replacement of Tia by Christophine, just as the doubling of Tia and the child Antoinette is more explicit than the doubling of Christophine and Antoinette. Both Creole women share an empathy for and understanding of their surroundings that Rochester can never approximate. Their understanding of West Indian experiences crashes, however, against Rochester's English behaviour and values. Christophine's magic potion fails and Antoinette's witchery of beauty and fortune crumble before the severity of Rochester's self-service. Seeking to escape from Rochester with Antoinette, Christophine's power to incite fear and respect in those she encounters fades before his alien point-of-view; similarly, Antoinette's spirit is quenched when Rochester withdraws his love.

After the dismissal of Christophine, Rochester needs only pressure Antoinette into some semblance of madness in order to dispose of her also. Lacking Christophine's sorcery to help her in dealing with Rochester, Antoinette develops the moon madness that enables her to liberate herself from Rochester — something she could not do while sane or through Christophine's intervention. Tall, dark, and fierce, mad Antoinette now incites in those around her the terror which Christophine once commanded. She escapes her jailer and sets fire to her jail. She then unites herself with Tia whom she sees call to her from beneath the

parapet of Thornfield Hall. At last Antoinette is able to emulate Tia whom sharp stones did not hurt and for whom fires always lit.

Written in Jean Rhys' seventies, after fifty years away from her Dominican home, *Wide Sargasso Sea* is Rhys' contribution to the dissolution of social barriers grounded in racial differences. It is a *tour de force* of imaginative art by which she resolved for herself her childhood friendship with Francine, and through which she painted for her readers an extraordinary facet of West Indian experience.

NOTES

1. Louis James, *Jean Rhys* (London: Longman, 1978), p.33.
2. Thomas F. Staley, *Jean Rhys* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979), p.1.
3. Ford Madox Ford, Preface, *The Left Bank*, by Jean Rhys (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1970), p.24.
4. Alec Waugh, *The Sugar Islands* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Company, 1949), pp.95-6.
5. Jean Rhys, *Smile Please* (London: André Deutsch, 1979), p.22.
6. Wilson Harris, 'Carnival of Psyche', *Kunapipi*, II, No 2, p.146.
7. Jean Rhys, *The Left Bank*, p.252.
8. Anna Morgan, the heroine who bears such an historically significant West Indian surname, shares with Anne Chewett a close variant of the Obeah woman's given name.
9. Marcelle Bernstein, 'The Inscrutable Miss Jean Rhys', *London Observer*, 1 June 1969, p.42.
10. Jean Rhys, 'I Spy A Stranger', *Art and Literature*, 8 (Spring 1966), p.52.
11. Jean Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark* (New York: Popular Library, n.d.), p.60.
12. Jean Rhys, *Smile Please*, p.31.
13. Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (New York: Popular Library, 1966), p.46. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.